

Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation Minister Michael De Jong
Language revitalization funding announcement
Victoria, B.C.
National Aboriginal Day - June 21, 2007

Thank you, Tyrone (McNeil, Chair, First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council) for your introduction.

Greetings to Chief Norman George, Elder Elmer George of the Songhees First Nation, Chief Andy Thomas of the Esquimalt First Nation, Regional Chief Shawn Atleo of the Assembly of First Nations, Elder John Elliott of the Tsartlip First Nation, Dr. Chief Tony Hunt from the Kwagiulth First Nation.

Where is Tony? He's hiding for the moment. We heard about his history with the Mungo Martin House. I have been advised that Tony shares a name – "Nakapunkin" – with his relative. The word, as I understand it, means "ten times chief". That's a point that resonates with me, when I think about leadership, and when I think about an electoral record. Chief Andy – both you and I are probably envious of somebody who is ten times chief.

Cliff Fregin, Chief Executive Officer of the New Relationship Trust, Monique Gray-Smith, Executive Director of Aboriginal Head-Start Association of British Columbia, Tracey Herbert, Executive Director of First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council, and President Bruce Dumont of the Métis Nation British Columbia: thank you all very much for being here as well. President Bruce Dumont – I know we're going to have some further activities with you later this afternoon, but thank you for being here also on behalf of the Métis Nation British Columbia.

How appropriate, ladies and gentleman, that on this National Aboriginal Day we should in a small way re-create the spirit of hospitality that has characterized the First Nations Aboriginal peoples who reside and have resided in these territories for so long. Here we are in the traditional territories of the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, and our little ceremony today plays a part in honouring that spirit.

The opportunity to paddle in the canoe down here to the ceremony made me think for a moment about that initial contact between people that would have taken place. It made me reflect on that welcoming atmosphere and spirit, when the chiefs and elders said: "Come ashore. You have travelled far. You are weary. Come ashore and find food, shelter, and welcome."

We are now properly recognizing that the history of Canada is very much linked to the history of Aboriginal peoples. It's a wonderful inheritance that we share. And it's something that the world and Canadians are coming to see more and more as being symbolic of Canada itself. I would suggest to you that this year in British Columbia, we are particularly well placed today to celebrate this National Aboriginal Day. Two years

into the New Relationship with First Nations – a relationship based on mutual respect, reconciliation and recognition of Aboriginal rights and title - government relations with B.C.'s Aboriginal peoples are changing for the better, and for good reason.

The Province, the First Nations Leadership Council (representing the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, represented by Shawn Atleo here today, and the First Nations Summit), individual First Nations, Métis Nation of British Columbia – we have all, over the course of the past number of months, been able to sign some incredibly historic, significant, relevant agreements. These are agreements that allocate resources and result in accomplishments that will impact in a very positive way, the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal peoples.

In 2005, when the Transformative Change Accord was signed, British Columbia and the First Nations Leadership Council committed to a specific goal of closing the socio-economic gap that has for too long divided Aboriginal peoples from other citizens. Our goal commits us to closing the gaps in health care, closing the gaps in education, closing the gaps in housing, and in general economic opportunities. And we are doing so in a concerted, deliberate and focused way.

We are making progress, ladies and gentlemen, through steady steps. And here we are coming together for one of those steps – to celebrate together and recognize the contribution of Aboriginal culture. You see, Aboriginal people possess a unique cultural wisdom preserved in ancient stories, legends portrayed in dynamic art, expressed in beautiful languages, nurtured through time-honoured customs and ceremonies.

They have passed down that heritage through generations on the stage of human history. This is a great accomplishment – one that we are coming to appreciate in Canada and in British Columbia. There are more than 30 indigenous languages spoken by Aboriginal people in British Columbia. Our province – British Columbia, is home to the single greatest diversity of indigenous languages anywhere in Canada – a country that boasts a great diversity of indigenous languages. Today, happily, Aboriginal culture is surging forward with a new sense of vitality; it is receiving long overdue respect and appreciation.

Aboriginal culture and heritage are attracting a growing following here in British Columbia, across Canada, and around the world. There is a growing recognition in Aboriginal communities that we must strengthen our efforts to preserve Aboriginal languages, so that the words of Aboriginal ancestors will continue to be spoken for many years to come and not be lost through the mists of time. We can all celebrate and take pride in the culture achievements, heritage, the languages of Aboriginal people in British Columbia and Canada. It is well worth preserving that wonderful heritage.

The benefits of preserving First Nations languages, Aboriginal languages, include improved literacy and increased youth graduation/achievement rates. Preserving these languages will help foster a greater sense of self esteem among Aboriginal youth - who

can say, when they hear and speak the language of the culture and history that they represent: "This is who I am. This is who we are. This is where we came from."

These outcomes and values are essential. We believe in bridging the gap between Aboriginal people and other British Columbians. The Province of British Columbia recognizes the importance of First Nations language, culture and heritage. Annually, the Province provides \$1-million to the First People's Heritage, Language and Culture Council for Aboriginal language preservation. In March of last year at the First Citizens' Forum in Vancouver, Premier Campbell – who sends his greetings and best wishes on this National Aboriginal Day of celebration – announced an additional \$1 million to further this work. Today, on National Aboriginal Day, I am pleased, along with participating partners, to announce another \$1.2 million funding package to implement an exciting plan supporting revitalization of First Nations languages and culture in British Columbia. [Applause]

The funding will support: language and culture camps for young people, master-apprentice programs in language and culture that connect Elders and First Nation learners; pre-school Aboriginal language and culture immersion programs to create new language speakers; and resources to support community language and culture authorities. This is a partnership, ladies and gentlemen. And this partnership speaks volumes to the many partnerships that characterize the New Relationship taking hold in British Columbia today.

In this partnership to support Aboriginal languages and culture, the Province of British Columbia is contributing \$400,000. The New Relationship Trust, represented here today by Cliff, has agreed to contribute \$500,000. Aboriginal Head-Start Association of BC is contributing \$200,000. The First People's Heritage, Language and Culture Council is contributing \$100,000. As partners together, we are signalling our commitment to restore fluency and literacy in First Nations languages. To succeed we need to build strong partnerships with Aboriginal people – partnerships like the one that this funding proposal is making possible.

The New Relationship Trust Act took effect in March, 2006. It followed in the wake of an agreement by the Province to transfer \$100 million to an independent corporation governed by an independent director. The New Relationship Trust provides tangible evidence of the government's commitment to build a New Relationship with First Nations by supporting capacity building, partnerships, and consultation in land and resource use.

The New Relationship Trust Board of Directors manages the funds. The seven directors were selected through collaboration between the Province and the First Nations Leadership Council. The Trust began its important work, I'm happy to say, by travelling across the province consulting extensively in communities to learn how Aboriginal people want to see the \$100 million fund used. This community-level input gave the board confidence to make this contribution and support this partnership today – because

of the clear support for First Nations languages and culture that emerged from those community consultations.

I want to thank the Nathan Matthew, Chair of New Relationship Trust. Nathan couldn't be here today, but I know that Cliff will convey our thanks and appreciation to him. And Cliff, thank you for your participation in our partnership.

The Aboriginal Head-Start Association of BC ensures Aboriginal children receive a positive sense of identity – a positive sense of themselves, a desire for life-long learning and opportunities to develop fully as a successful people. I want to thank Executive Director Monique Grey-Smith. Please convey to your entire organization our thanks for their support. And thank them for having the vision to realize that today we are planting seeds that will reap great benefit in the future.

To the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council – the unique First Nations-directed organization governed by representatives from all regions of British Columbia – I say, thank you.

Since its inception in 1990 the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council has distributed over \$17 million to First Nations communities and individuals for language, arts and culture projects. The benefits associated with that investment and your efforts have been on display here today in a number of very visible and significant ways. The government wants to thank Tyrone McNeil, Chair of the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council and all of their members for their efforts. Thank you for the vision and courage to continue in a very passionate way to advocate on behalf of First Nations culture and language.

Ever since we began this historic journey in British Columbia – the journey we call the New Relationship – Aboriginal people have advised us consistently that success depends on tangible agreements and achievements that deliver meaningful benefits on the ground, at community level. You can see this principle reflected in the community consultation work done by the New Relationship Trust. You can see it in the efforts made to listen to what the people say can have an immediate impact.

Ladies and gentlemen, that same collaborative spirit emerged in the protocol signed with the Métis Nation British Columbia. That collaboration provides an essential ingredient in the New Relationship. Mutual respect marks a key element of the New Relationship. It includes respect for Aboriginal culture. The partnership that has brought the resources to bear that we are announcing today demonstrates our collective respect for the preservation of Aboriginal languages. It shows our respect for the great cultural heritage that Aboriginal people so rightly value and so generously share with all of us.

This is a partnership that will bring together Elders and people in Aboriginal communities to help forge the cultural and linguistic link between the generations. This is a partnership that will support language and culture camps where teaching and learning

can flourish in communities. This is partnership where master-apprenticeship programs in language and culture will create three-year study opportunities for Aboriginal youth.

Ladies and gentleman – it's National Aboriginal Day. It's a day of celebration – especially so in British Columbia, here, today, now – as we embark on a New Relationship. It's a day to celebrate, as we forge lasting partnerships, as we see the progress we are making in developing a true sense of respect and reconciliation. It's a day to celebrate the tangible steps we are taking – steady steps that result in improved conditions and circumstances for people on the ground, in the communities where they live. It's a day to celebrate our progress as we begin in a real way to bridge the gaps that for too long have separated Aboriginal people from other British Columbians.

This is truly a day to celebrate. To the people of the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations, thank you again for your warm welcome. To all of you for being here and for the partners who have made this day possible, I say, thank you. Let us go forward now together and continue to forge those partnerships, and continue to do the tremendous work that is so much a hallmark of our New Relationship.

Happy National Aboriginal Day. Thank you very much!